A Study of Factors Affecting EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Skill and the Strategies for Improvement

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is a significant skill that furthers the development of learners' various academic tasks. It helps them decoding a text, analyzing, explaining, and expressing their own ideas about written materials. Learners should develop a strong ability to understand written materials to struggle with the academic tasks that their teachers deal with them. A primary objective of reading comprehension is to aid learners improve skills and comprehension of texts if they want to be skilled readers. In this review paper, the researchers define the term reading comprehension and reading strategies, elaborate previous findings about the relationship between reading strategies and reading comprehension skill, state factors affecting reading comprehension skill, explain the effective strategies for reading comprehension, and finally mention suggestions for improving reading comprehension skill. The findings of this review paper indicated that appropriate reading strategies play a vital role in improving EFL learners' reading comprehension skill.

Keywords: reading comprehension, affecting factors, strategies, EFL learners

1. Introduction

Reading is a significant skill that learners should know. Learners read texts for various goals from gaining information to enjoyment. It helps EFL learners to be familiar with the subjects of their majors and improve their language knowledge. Kim and Anderson (2011) and Salehi, Lari, and Rezanejad (2014) expressed that reading has a key role in completing all university courses. Although EFL learners are proficient in their language, they usually have a lot of problems in comprehending texts. Thus, it can be stated that there are some factors that impact learners' reading comprehension process.

The use of reading strategies in language learning has a vital role to improve reading comprehension (Anderson, 2003; Cohen, 1998). Readers' language proficiency is related to the use of their reading strategies (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Shen, 2003; Wharton, 2000; Yang, 2002)**.** Based on these researches, readers who have high proficiency try to use global strategies for understanding a text (Kletzien, 1991; Zhang & Wu, 2009). Readers who have low proficiency, try to utilize particular techniques that are not beneficial to understand a text (Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004; Zhang & Wu, 2009).

Reading comprehension is a complex process that involves components, processes, and factors with the aim of finding better ways of improving it among learners. He continued that reading comprehension is an interactive process of finding meanings from a text (Meniado, 2016; Rumelhart, 1981). Hermosa (2002) and Meniado (2016) supported this and stated that reading comprehension is a series of cognitive activities that include a lot of dimensions like the understanding of words and their meanings, mindful reaction, and integration.

Koda (2007) said that there are various variables that impact learners' reading comprehension. Some of these variables involve vocabulary knowledge, prior knowledge, metacognitive information, and reading strategies. Trehearne and Doctorow (2005) expressed that there are other factors that affect learners' reading comprehension skill. These factors are learners' reading attitudes, useful teaching on comprehension methods, versatility, text form, and being aware of various reading comprehension strategies.

The other factors that affect learners' reading comprehension skill are susceptibility to the text structure, making of conclusion, and comprehension checking (Meniado, 2016; Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2004). In addition,

Nergis (2013) stated that deepness of vocabulary knowledge, syntactic consciousness, and metacognitive recognition are some of the important factors that can affect reading comprehension skill. In this paper, the researchers explain the term reading comprehension and reading strategies, review previous findings about the relationship between reading strategies and reading comprehension skill, express factors affecting reading comprehension skill, elaborate the effective strategies for reading comprehension, and offer suggestions for improving reading comprehension skill.

2. Definition of Reading Comprehension

Pressley (2000) and Birsch (2011) defined reading comprehension as the ability to get meaning from what is read. Reading comprehension needs different reading skills such as word recognition, fluency, lexical knowledge, and pre-existing knowledge to be undertaken quickly so that the reader gets knowledge from text. According to Block (2004) and Graves, Juel, and Graves (1998), reading comprehension is a complicated process in which readers have an important role in making meaning from the text through applying existing skills.

Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, and Seidenberg (2001) and Tompkins (2011) defined reading comprehension as the level of comprehending a text. This comprehension arises from the interplay between the written words and how they elicit knowledge outside the message. Tompkins (2011) expressed that comprehension is a creative process that hinges on four skills called phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. According to Marilyn McCord (1994), proficient reading is dependent on the capability to recognize words easily. It is identified by individuals' cognitive growth which is the structure of reasoning processes.

3. Definition of Reading Strategies

Baker and Brown (1984) defined reading strategies as purposeful and cognitive actions that learners take when they read to assist them in making and keeping meaning. According to Pressley (2006) and Trabasso and Bouchard (2002), reading strategies are conscious behaviors that readers use before, during, and after reading to get meaning from the text. They are particular learned procedures that are used by readers to promote active, competent, and intentional reading.

Block and Pressley (2002) and Keene and Zimmerman (1997) expressed that reading comprehension strategies are regarded as effectives instruments to help learners understand better. They are also conscious plans and activities that assist learners develop and control their comprehension of texts. According to Alder (2001), reading comprehension strategies are conscious schemes that successful readers use to understand a text. The use of reading strategies aid learners become energetic readers who are in control of their own reading comprehension.

According to Lai (2013), reading strategies are methods of finding the meanings of a text. Anderson (1999) defined reading strategies as the mental tasks that readers apply to make meaning from the text. Factors that influence reading strategy use are readers' previous knowledge (Pritchard, 1990), text type (Chen, 1999) and readers' proficiency (Kletzien, 1991).

4. Previous Studies about the Relationship between Reading Strategies and Reading Comprehension Skill

There is a positive relationship between learners' reading strategies and their reading comprehension skill. According to Ahmadi and Pourhossein (2012), reading strategy has a significant impact on the readers' reading comprehension skill. Reading strategy can make better the reading skill of proficient and less proficient readers. Readers use diverse reading strategies and know what, when, how, and why to apply them in their reading comprehension process.

Ahmadi and Pourhossein (2012) continued that through using reading strategies, learners can understand the major point of a paragraph, explain unfamiliar words, or sentences, and abridge their reading. These strategies can help readers solve their difficulties when reading texts. There are some studies related to the development of reading comprehension to design some reading comprehension suggestions that permit teachers to give considerable help to their EFL learners. Scott (2010) carried out a study. This study was focused on how word knowledge impacted reading comprehension to older readers. They wanted to gain a basic knowledge of how words work. That is, the functions each word had in context and a series of strategies for approaching new words faced when they were reading.

The results obtained from the above research indicated that reading comprehension was affected significantly by the learners' level of word knowledge which showed vocabulary and spelling abilities and the capability to decipher words in print. Recognizing words included comprehending both the form and meaning of words. Teachers simplify the development of word knowledge by the explicit instruction of word samples and word-solving methods. The purpose of instruction in reading, spelling, and vocabulary was to aid learners to improve word awareness and become independent word-solvers in all fields.

Paynter, Bodrova, and Doty (2005) and Stanovich (1986) supported the above finding. Paynter, Bodrova, and Doty (2005) said that word knowledge or vocabulary is very important for the readers to understand what they read in L2. They found that reading comprehension is a complicated subject that includes many levels of processing. One of the most important features of understanding was the potential to deal with unknown words of a text. Readers who worked with word-level activities utilized cognitive means that could be assigned to deeper levels of text analysis.

Stanovich (1986) examined the increasing impact of poor reading and vocabulary skills. Children who were poor readers did not have sufficient vocabulary. When young children struggled with reading, they read less than their more competent fellow students and were exposed to fewer new words. This limitation on their vocabulary development made advancement in reading very difficult. The impact of these shortages made learning more difficult and the gap between skilled and less skilled readers was increased.

Torgesen (2006) examined cognitive aspects related to memory and motivation factors and these factors influenced the comprehension reading materials. The researcher wanted to find out the factors impacted learners' reading comprehension. The results of this study indicated that memory and motivation had a significant role in reading comprehension. Due to this, learners who had memory difficulties had critical problems to understand texts.

According to Saarnio, Oka, and Paris (1990), Garrison, Long, and Dowaliby (1997), and Kintsch and Kintsch (2005), working memory span affected the comprehension of text. Human memory was regarded as an important cognitive factor in the understanding of reading passages and it helped these learners to get a better comprehending of texts while they were reading some materials. In addition, motivation had a great effect on reading comprehension skill.

Pressley and Hilden (2002) stated that teachers encouraged their learners by providing fascinating texts and this in turn permitted them alternatives in reading and writing and helped learners to set real aims for reading. When learners enjoyed their reading they felt confident about texts and consequently found it easier to understand them. Vazalwar (2011) carried out a study. He said that anxiety affected the development of reading comprehension negatively. According to the findings of this research, it was inferred that anxiety is related negatively but significantly with reading comprehension in learners. The normal level of anxiety should have a positive impact on reading comprehension. The higher anxiety in girls signifying low comprehension and lower anxiety in boys signifying high comprehension was a reason of the gender impact that affected reading comprehension.

The above study was supported by Madsen, Brown, and Jones (1991) and Gardner and MacIntyre (1993), indicating that anxiety was related negatively to reading comprehension. The anxiety was an emotion similar to fear or happiness and this emotion affected learners' reading comprehension. Furthermore, the other factor that that is very important in the development of reading comprehension is pertinent to the background knowledge. Previous knowledge has had a vital role in the comprehension of text and the lack of it can impact reading comprehension negatively (Aebersold & Field, 2005; Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1988; Hudson, 2007; Vacca & Vacca, 2008).

Nguyen (2007) carried out a research toward the effect of background knowledge on reading comprehension skill. The findings of this study indicated learners who had prior knowledge could easily understand the text. However, when learners were exposed to different unknown readings, they had many problems to understand them and they had to read more than once to comprehend texts.

5. Factors Affecting Reading Comprehension Skill

According to Dennis (2008), reading comprehension is a complex process between identifying printed symbols and interpreting the meaning behind the symbols. Some factors affect reading comprehension skill. They are complexity of the reading text, environmental influences, anxiety during reading comprehension, interest and motivation, decoding or word recognition speed, and medical problems. In the following section, these factors are elaborated in detail.

One of the factors that impacts learners' reading comprehension is the complexity of the texts. This factor is influenced by the readers' strength and fluency in language and their comprehending of its applications and different meanings. Oral abilities have a significant part in identifying how skilled a reader can be because learners hear words and obtain a lot of vocabulary. A lot of vocabulary assist learners in explaining the unknown words through applying the opinions of context (Dennis, 2008).

The second factor related to the environmental conditions that impact the learners who try to read a passage. Readers may have a lot of problems to understand a text in an unorganized environment than those who read in a

calm and controlled place. If learners are in an unsafe place, they find it difficult to focus on their reading. When they are in safe environments, their reading comprehension ability will better. Readers will lose their concentration in understanding a text when there are noises like televisions or radios (Dennis, 2008).

The third factor is pertinent to the anxiety during reading comprehension. Examinations, class work, or homework situations can put more pressure on readers' reading than reading for enjoyment. Some learners react positively to examinations while others are overwhelmed by the pressure to carry out a reading activity. Learners who experience this anxiety may not completely understand the instructions and this may lead to confusion and poor comprehension of the reading task (Dennis, 2008).

The fourth factor is interest and motivation. According to Dennis (2008), learners' interest and motivation are very important in developing reading comprehension skill. If readers find the reading material monotonous, they will have a lot of problems in concentrating on their comprehension. This can lead to a lowering of reading comprehension among readers. If the reading material is interesting for learners they can easily understand it and can remember it clearly. EFL teachers should motivate their learners through providing interesting reading materials during their class time.

The fifth factor is related to decoding or word recognition speed. Readers who have problems in decoding and recognizing words read slowly and find it more difficult to understand the meaning of passages than those without decoding problems. She expressed that vocabulary influences the reading comprehension skill because readers apply decoding skills to understand the pronunciation and meaning of words they have not seen before. Persons who have enough vocabulary can clarify the meaning or reading passages faster than those who should guess the meaning of unfamiliar words according to the clues of context (Dennis, 2008).

The last factor is concerned with the medical problems. According to Hollowell (2013), poor reading comprehension skill may be related to the medical difficulty that does not get addressed until the child is older. This involves undiagnosed ADD (attention deficit disorder), speech problems, and hearing impairments. She emphasized that learners with speech and hearing difficulties are less likely to take part in oral reading and class discussions. These are the two activities that help learners improve their reading comprehension skill.

6. Effective Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension Skill

If readers want to read various kinds of texts they should use different reading strategies. Good readers interact with texts to expand an understanding of the information before them. Some good reader strategies are predicting, forecasting, deducing, summarizing, examining, and evaluating. There are a lot of tasks that teachers can use them to help with reading strategies in particular content areas. The application of effective comprehension strategies is very important when learners want to improve their reading comprehension skill. These strategies provide particular instructions for expanding comprehension skills (Cain & Oakhill, 2009).

There are some useful strategies for improving reading comprehension skill. They are reciprocal teaching, instructional conversations, visualization, partner reading, multiple reading strategies, assessment, and running records. In the following section, these strategies are explained in detail. According to reciprocal teaching, teachers teach learners to predict, summarize, clarify, and ask questions for parts of a text. These strategies have been regarded as effective strategies for developing learners' reading comprehension skill. That is, learners will develop stronger reading comprehension skills on their own if teachers give them mental instruments for understanding a text (Pressley, 2006).

According to Goldenberg (1991), class discussions help learners produce opinions and new questions. He continued that all of our knowledge results from questions which are another way of telling that question-asking that is our most significant mental tool. There are different kinds of questions that teachers should consider. They are remembering, testing understanding, application or solving, invite synthesis or creating, and evaluation and judging. EFL teachers should form these kinds of questions by "think-aloud" before, during, and after reading a text. When learners relate a passage to an experience, another book, or other facts about the world, they are "making a connection." Making connections aid learners understand the writer's intentions.

Visualization is a mental image created in a readers' mind while reading a text which brings words to life and helps them improve their reading comprehension skill. Asking sensory questions can help learners become better visualizers. Partner reading is a strategy that is created for pairs. Teachers select two suitable books for their learners to read. Learners should first read their own book. Once they have finished this, they are given the chance to write down their own general questions for their partners. Learners read books out loud to one another and ask one another questions about the book they read. This strategy can provide a model of fluent reading and helps

learners learn decoding skills by presenting positive feedback and direct chances for teachers to circulate in the class, watch their learners, and present individual corrections (Bell, 2009).

Tompkins (2011) expressed that there are informal and formal assessments to check an individual's comprehension skill and utilization of comprehension strategies. Informal assessments are done by observation and the use of instruments such as story boards, word sorts, and interactive writing. Formal assessments are district or state assessments that assess all learners on significant skills.

7. Suggestions for Improving Reading Comprehension Skill

Based on the findings of this review paper, the following points are suggested for EFL teachers. They can help EFL learners develop their background knowledge, teach text structures to them, and persuade them to prepare for, monitor, and evaluate their own reading comprehension skill. They should teach their learners how to use reading comprehension strategies appropriately and effectively. They have the responsibility of teaching reading comprehension strategies to their learners either separately or in combination. They should teach their learners to recognize and apply the text's organizational structures to understand, learn, and remember content. They should explain EFL learners how to establish and relate the sections of a text and teach general structures of informational texts. They can guide their learners by high-quality discussion on the meaning of texts. They can choose appropriate texts to support comprehension development in learners. They should teach reading comprehension skill with many types of texts. In addition, they can choose texts with word recognition and comprehension difficulty that are suitable for the learners' reading ability and the educational tasks, and finally they can help their learners find the goals and advantages of reading comprehension.

8. Conclusions

The findings of this review paper indicated that the use of reading comprehension strategies assist EFL learners in understanding the texts easily. EFL learners should read more authentic texts to have a better reading understanding about different kinds of written texts in their language. Having a good reading habit helps learners understand authentic texts, although some texts are not pertinent to their interests. Successful readers try to apply different factors and skills to get the meaning of texts. EFL teachers should encourage their learners to identify the factors that can influence them to get a deep understanding about what they read. These learners should be involved in the reading process through the use of various strategies to monitor their meaning. All of these factors and strategies work together to make the meaning processes easily and effectively. The findings of this study showed that EFL teachers should motivate their learners to read different materials, recognize their learners' comprehension difficulties, and have positive opinions about their reading activities to easily understand the different texts. EFL teachers should provide information about the weaknesses of their learners to develop a good reading comprehension skill.

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